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# Redefining the Gaze: The Self-Portraiture of Helene Schjerfbeck, Romaine Brooks, and Marianne Werefkin

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## Introduction

Throughout the history of art, self-portraiture has been explored by artists as means to emphasize their artistic capabilities, claim their importance in modern art, and solidify their existence. The work accomplished by female artists, however, must be considered separately from the overall genre of portraiture. Women in the early twentieth century needed to approach the canvas with careful consideration of past representations of their gender. Additionally, women were mindful of how their technique would impress upon critics. Helen Schjerfbeck, Romaine Brooks, and Marianne Werefkin distanced themselves from the artistic historical tradition of idealized female portraiture by creating self-representations that emphasized the internal experience as opposed to the external.

By approaching the subject of self, an artist is blurring the lines between creator and model. Unlike their male counterparts, female artists considered the historical significance of female models. Up until the twentieth century, women were usually portrayed with elegant beauty, as objects to be admired. Paired with the unforgiving cynicism of contemporary critics, women had to carefully plan and execute their self-portraits. While female painters often portrayed themselves in a quieter, predictable

manner, males boldly presented themselves through self-imagery.<sup>1</sup> This can make early female self-portraiture difficult to read autobiographically, as a subdued painting does not necessarily translate into a subdued woman.

Keeping in mind the traditional standard of female portraiture, the un-idealized self-representations that Helen Schjerfbeck, Romaine Brooks, and Marianne Werefkin painted were no small statement at the turn of the century. They shifted away from canonical art historical representations and cemented themselves in modernity. Pursuing an artistic career was a bold choice for women, but creating art that went against traditional standards was revolutionary. By utilizing innovative techniques, representing the internal experience, and challenging the male gaze, these three women turned away from the academy and changed the way female artists were perceived. These women personify the *femme nouvelle*, the independent woman who is not weighted with the pressures of conventional femininity.<sup>2</sup> Their self-portraits aim not to describe their appearance, but to explain who they are.

The desire to represent the internal experience was born alongside the introduction of psychoanalysis in the late nineteenth century. This breakthrough was significant to artists,

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<sup>1</sup>Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self-Portraits* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998), 18.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, at 125.

many of whom took it as an opportunity to discover their inner selves. Introspection was the central focus in the self-portraits of Helen Schjerfbeck, Romaine Brooks, and Marianne Werefkin. The fact that these women never met and, likely, never heard of each other proves the international attraction to psychoanalytic approaches to artistic production. They were separated by country, style, and time, yet all three women expressed themselves in similarly unconventional ways. By grouping them together, it is evident that they shared a common sensitivity to the artist's mind.

Looking at the artists individually, it is evident that their processes and experiences with art varied greatly. Helene Schjerfbeck, the most prolific self-portraitist of the three, spent much of her career working in isolation. Although she found great success at the Paris Salon and within the artist communities in the city, Schjerfbeck was forced to return to Finland due to her financial and family situations. Severed from the modernity of the continent, Schjerfbeck found herself in the middle of an entirely different art scene. Finnish artists were interested in nationalism, preferring patriotic themes over genre paintings. A distaste for this work led, in part, to Schjerfbeck's hermetic lifestyle.

It was not uncommon for female artists like Helene Schjerfbeck to work in isolation, Paula Modersohn-Becker and Käthe Kollwitz are other notable examples. This could be attributed, in part, to the lack of openness in welcoming women into art movements. Even though the early twentieth century was a time of rapid artistic development, experimentation, and optimism, most women associated with major artistic movements are recognized only by their connection with male members.<sup>3</sup>

Marianne Werefkin fits within the latter stereotype; although she was a founding member of *Der Blaue Reiter*, she is often mentioned in relation to Alexei Jawlensky. Regardless of her standing within art history, Werefkin was a leading intellectual at the turn-of-the-century. Her salon was visited by famous artists, dancers, and composers where they contemplated the concepts of modern art. As an artist, Werefkin shied away from the extreme abstraction of her colleague Wassily Kandinsky.

Romaine Brooks is over ten years younger than both Schjerfbeck and Werefkin, but her work is timeless. Her individualized style paired with a cosmopolitan lifestyle puts her between the extreme isolation of Schjerfbeck and the intellectually driven Werefkin. Seeing great success during her lifetime, Brooks was a much sought-after portraitist among the elite class. Most women artists of the time were not graced with the same overwhelming praise. There was a seemingly conscious effort to dissuade women from pursuing art.<sup>4</sup> Such criticism was not only influenced by the apparent belief that they were less talented, but also because the late nineteenth century saw an abundance of female painters. Industrialized society enabled women to leave the home and pursue artistic opportunities. Simultaneously, women were allowed into places of art education.

Criticism was also evoked in the mode of abstract art, despite the proliferation of modern artistic movements at the turn-of-the-century. Critics preferred traditional representations, especially from women. There was a fear that if women started to break away from this artistry, they would also decide to separate themselves from other societal confines.<sup>5</sup> Schjerfbeck, Brooks, and Werefkin all worked

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<sup>3</sup>Elsa Honig Fine, *Women and Art* (New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld Publishers, 1993), 142.

<sup>4</sup>Ahtola-Moorhouse 2007, 23.

<sup>5</sup>James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2014), 224.

in some form of abstraction. Schjerfbeck's work progressively becomes more obscure throughout her life, eventually paring down details until only a shadow of a figure remains. Brooks explores abstraction through a limited palette and new forms of figuration. Werefkin makes a dramatic jump in her work from naturalistic art to abstract, using expressionist techniques to bring color to the forefront.

All three women went against the traditional modes of creation, both within the broader realm of painting and within the genre of portraiture. Their work signifies a change in women's self-perception and empowerment. They forewent the beautification of the past in favor of more honest representations.

In this paper, I will individually consider Helene Schjerfbeck, followed by Romaine Brooks, and culminating with Marianne Werefkin. I will analyze their respective self-portraits, proving the significance of these works. By considering the history of these women in relation to their artwork, it will become evident that these women created paintings with the intention of expressing the inner self. When viewed in tandem with the societal standards in the beginning of the twentieth century, it also becomes clear that Schjerfbeck, Brooks, and Werefkin were revolutionary in their modes of expression.

## II. Helen Schjerfbeck

Helene Schjerfbeck began her career as an artist traditionally, beginning at the School of Finnish Art Society and later moving on to the Colarossi in Paris. Although she eventually turned to-

wards abstraction, these teachings created a foundation that Schjerfbeck carried with her throughout her life. This pattern was echoed in the lives of Romaine Brooks and Marianne Werefkin. Two factors may have influenced each of their turns against the academy. The first was a major shift in the art world at the *fin de siècle* towards modernism and abstraction, to which all three artists reacted in their work. Schjerfbeck and Werefkin tended towards these movements, creating work that challenged contemporary standards. Brooks aimed for an art that returned to tradition, preferring strict aesthetic to loose abstraction. The second factor was the distinct critical distaste for female artists, which many women responded to by pushing back with even more controversial artworks.<sup>6</sup> The lack of acceptance into modern art communities may have fueled the un-idealized nature of these portraits; it certainly had notable significance to Helene Schjerfbeck.

Schjerfbeck was raised in Finland during the late nineteenth century, when the country was subjugated by Russian rule. Finnish nationalism abounded, and the heritage of the country as well as its traditions were well promoted. A distinct patriotic theme filtered into Finnish artwork, and it was under these ideals that Schjerfbeck was taught artistic techniques. She began studying at the age of eleven, eventually continuing her studies at the private academy of Adolf von Becker.<sup>7</sup> By 1879, Schjerfbeck earned a state grant to study in Paris. It was here, in the cultural center of nineteenth-century Europe, that Schjerfbeck turned towards a more emotive artistic mode. This change was certainly

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<sup>6</sup>Shulamith Behr, 15.

<sup>7</sup>Schjerfbeck's talents were supported by her father who, despite her family's poor financial situation, ensured she had all the supplies necessary. His support must have outweighed her mother's disapproval, which persisted throughout her life. Schjerfbeck's mother refused to even discuss art with her daughter, causing a rift between the two women. Schjerfbeck certainly resented her mother's disdain for art, as well as thinly veiled attempts to keep Schjerfbeck from painting. Schjerfbeck spent the majority of her time cleaning the house at her mother's request, often allotting hardly two hours to work on her paintings. Alessandra Comini, "Review", *Woman's Art Journal* 16 (1995): 51. See also: Michelle Farcos, "Helene Schjerfbeck's Self-Portraits: Revelation and Dissimulation," *Woman's Arts Journal* 16:1 (1995), 14. As well as: Ahtola-Moorhouse 2007, 21.

inspired not only by the famous artworks she saw in museums like the Louvre, but also through paintings by Edouard Manet and Paul Cezanne.<sup>8</sup>

Schjerfbeck exhibited at the Paris Salon three times during her years abroad, receiving critical acclaim for her work.<sup>9</sup> Her success on the Continent was not as evident in Finnish art circles, although the Finnish Art Society continued to support her studies. A disinterest in her work could be explained by both her subject matter (genre scenes and portraiture) as well as her gender. Schjerfbeck showed her work at a Grand Finnish Exhibition in 1885, but critics did not take kindly to paintings done by women. J.J. Tikkanen wrote, “Of the 45 artists on display no less than 21 of them are women! This astonishing fact can perhaps be explained when one considers the suitability of art as a pastime. Among this group, however, there are some women who think of their endeavors with the utmost seriousness. None of them is anything more than mediocre, though one or two of them may yet improve with time.”<sup>10</sup> This response exemplifies the fact that, although women were being accepted into art circles, equality was still a fanciful concept. Other critics ignored content altogether, opting to discuss technique.<sup>11</sup> Women had to either disregard these comments or fight back against them. Schjerfbeck, Brooks, and Werefkin chose the latter.

Despite her desire to continue her studies in Paris, Schjerfbeck was eventually forced

to return to Finland.<sup>12</sup> After 1902, she never again left Scandinavia. Schjerfbeck’s isolation from the art world was a self-inflicted protective measure. Because she was unable to return to a life of leisure—her financial situation would not permit it and neither would her mother—Schjerfbeck was forced to stay in Finland. Her work became more simplified and intrinsically focused, fostering tense relationships with leading Finnish artists of the time. The stress, born from her resilience against the conventional, was so overwhelming that Schjerfbeck spent much of the 1890s in and out of health facilities. The harmful impact this had on her life led Schjerfbeck to shy away from the public eye, preferring to live in isolation.

Once committed to a life of solitude, Schjerfbeck’s work began to rapidly evolve. Her break from society freed her from any lingering conservative restraints. She focused her attention on capturing the inner spirit of her subject, often conveying her own emotions onto the canvas.<sup>13</sup> This unconscious transference can be understood in her letter to friend Einar Reuter, “It is the subconscious, the primitive aspects of one’s soul that create art, not rational thought, at least not in my case.”<sup>14</sup> Schjerfbeck’s belief in an artistic pull outside her cognizant mind is part of why her work is so multidimensional. Her understanding of these concepts evolved during her time in France. She was surrounded by a society that actively investigated the newest cultural phenomena, such as the advent of psychology.

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<sup>8</sup>Ahtola-Moorhouse 2007, 23. See also: Leena Ahtola-Moorhouse, *And Nobody Knows What I’m Like: Helene Schjerfbeck’s Self-Portraits 1878-1945* (Helsinki: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Taide Art Publishers, 2000), 18. As well as: Carolin Köchling, “Sur/Faces: People as Project Surfaces, Images as Models,” in *Helene Schjerfbeck*, ed. Carolin Köchling and Max Hollein (Frankfurt: Kerber Art, 2014), 19.

<sup>9</sup>Ahtola-Moorhouse 2007, 23.

<sup>10</sup>As cited in Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ahtola-Moorhouse 2000, 28.

<sup>12</sup>It should be noted that Schjerfbeck’s return to Finland was reluctant, but unfortunately necessary. Not only had she run out of funds to further her studies abroad, but she had to take over the care of her mother. Her brother was getting married, and since Helene Schjerfbeck was an unmarried woman it was expected that she assume these responsibilities. Comini, 53.

<sup>13</sup>Comini, 51.

<sup>14</sup>As cited in Ahtola-Moorhouse 2000, 28.



Closely associated with the Scandinavian artists in Paris was Axel Munthe, a doctor who specialized in hypnosis. Schjerfbeck's close friend Helena Westermarck was present for one of Munthe's hypnosis facilities demonstrations.<sup>15</sup> Although it is unknown if Munthe and Schjerfbeck ever discussed his work, it is doubtless that she would have been aware of his experiments with the unconscious and the rising popularity of psychoanalysis. The scientific breakthroughs in psychology held significant sociological value as people began seeing the self as a pliable and layered entity as opposed to stagnant and predetermined.<sup>16</sup> Schjerfbeck's interpretation of this information involved a deep investigation of the subconscious. This is especially apparent in her more than forty self-portraits.

In 1912, at the age of fifty, Helene Schjerfbeck created the first self-portrait in her newly developed style (Fig. 1). Schjerfbeck's two previous self-portraits, created over twenty years prior, were naturalistic representations that hinted at the influence of famous paintings. The 1912 self-portrait was a personal study, as were most of her subsequent self-representations, which sought to alleviate the stresses of age and analyze her life thus far. Schjerfbeck most likely decided to create this painting because of her milestone fiftieth birthday, seeing as she inscribed the date alongside her signature.<sup>17</sup> This work marks the beginning of a lifelong attempt to capture her essence on canvas, not simply her appearance.

The figure appears much younger than her actual age, implying that Schjerfbeck



Figure 1: Helene Schjerfbeck, *Self-Portrait*, 1912, Oil on Canvas

painted a mask over her face to hide the world from her true appearance. However, it is more likely that she was struggling with her age. As a painter of

internal experiences, she would not have imagined herself as an older woman. Leena Ahtola-Moorhouse suggests that Schjerfbeck is, “exploring her state of mind, displaying her creative vitality.”<sup>18</sup> This idea is further supported by the fact that she did not portray herself in an idealized way, as was the norm at the turn-of-the-century. Although Schjerfbeck appears younger, her anxious expression, deep-set eyes, and unembellished outfit force the viewer to see her insecurities. She did not beautify her image; she mirrored her internal self.

Unlike the works by Romaine Brooks and Marianne Werefkin, Schjerfbeck does not meet the viewer's gaze. She looks over her shoulder, averting her eyes slightly down and to the right. Not only is she avoiding the intrusive viewer, but Schjerfbeck is also failing to meet her own gaze.<sup>19</sup> She is not quite willing to confront herself, her past, or the internal perspective she analyzes.

<sup>15</sup>Farcos, 15.

<sup>16</sup>Ahtola-Moorhouse 2000, 11.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Farcos, 12.

Analyzing Schjerfbeck's expression in *Self-Portrait*, there is a distinct difference between the right and left side of her face. Thus, the mirror impacts the viewer's perspective. A self-portrait is almost always created by an artist referencing a mirror, as done by Schjerfbeck, Brooks, and Werefkin. In this way, their image is reversed on the canvas. Therefore, when I refer to the left side of the painting, I am also referring to the literal left side of her face and not the perceived left. This distinction is vital when interpreting the significance of the two sides of the painting.

The eyes themselves are of particular interest. The right eye is delicately rendered, describing the pupil, the subtle color shifts within the green iris, and even the shadow from the eyelid. This is a stark contrast to the left eye which has been simplified to a flat patch of blue. The difference between the eyes can be attributed to Schjerfbeck's interest in introspection, as well as a reference to her childhood injury. At the age of four, Helene Schjerfbeck fell down the stairs and severely damaged her left hip.<sup>20</sup> Schjerfbeck sustained a lifelong limp from the incident, thus influencing her personality and artwork. The psychoanalyst Sirkka Jansson speculates that the unbalanced composition between the left and right sides of Schjerfbeck's paintings is a reflection of her childhood injury.<sup>21</sup> It is surely not a coincidence that the artist chose to use her left, injured side to represent the inter-

nal experience. Living with a disability, however subtle it may seem to modern perspective, was a matter of emotional discomfort for Schjerfbeck.<sup>22</sup>

The eyes also speak to the duality of existence, the real and the imagined.<sup>23</sup> The right, more naturalistic eye represents the physical world. The left, abstracted eye is symbolic of the internal experience. By forcing these contradicting realities upon the same visage, Schjerfbeck implies that she is at war with herself.<sup>24</sup> Schjerfbeck's anxious expression, her inability to make eye contact with the viewer, and her turned body all add to the unsettling impression that she is between two worlds.

The dark blue, unmitigated color of Schjerfbeck's painting frock creates a ghostly illusion, forcing her body backwards and separating her head from it. Interestingly, Schjerfbeck does not appear decapitated, although the stark difference in color values between her face and coat—as well as the dissolved neck—should confuse the eye. Instead, Schjerfbeck forces the viewer to look at her face. This bold composition juxtaposes her apprehensive expression. Schjerfbeck's expression is also contrasted by the bright blush on her cheeks and nose, hinting at her vibrancy.<sup>25</sup> By painting a plain, unembellished dress, Schjerfbeck reveals her disinterest in portraying herself as part of the physical world.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Although her father wanted to take out a loan to fund a doctor for Schjerfbeck's injury, her mother refused saying, "With what, then, would we buy Magnus's [Schjerfbeck's older brother] books and clothes for school?" Rakel Liehu, "Helene," *World Literature Today* 78:3-4 (2004): 111.

<sup>21</sup>As mentioned in Ahtola-Moorhouse 2000, 81.

<sup>22</sup>Ahtola-Moorhouse 2007, 21.

<sup>23</sup>Schneede, 34.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid. Schneede argues that Schjerfbeck is on the fence between reality and imagination, ready to intervene if necessary. In this instance I would have to disagree. Schjerfbeck is not passively watching and waiting. The anxious expression on her face speaks to a greater desperation, the dualities of her realities confusing and discomforting her.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>26</sup>Farcos furthers this argument to state that Schjerfbeck's use of exaggerated makeup acts as a protective mask. Implying that the bright blush was intended to transform Schjerfbeck's visage into one of youthful attraction undermines the artist's ability to portray the internal experience and instead insinuates that Schjerfbeck was more focused on the external. I would offer the interpretation that Schjerfbeck was opening a window unto her soul, allowing the viewer to see her true life force. Whereas Farcos argues that she is creating a mask, Schjerfbeck is actually doing the opposite. Farcos 15.

Helene Schjerfbeck's 1912 self-portrait goes against all traditional representations of women and artists. She forewent the traditional palette and paintbrush, choosing to



Figure 2: Helene Schjerfbeck, *Self-Portrait*, 1895, Oil on Canvas, 38 x 31 cm

disregard the male-artist model.<sup>27</sup> Whether or not she did this as a conscious revolt against the masculinized standard is unknown. However, it furthers her disinterest in the physical world and her preoccupation with the internal. While she

does not portray herself as an artist, Schjerfbeck also refuses to align herself with the traditionally sensual and desirable model.<sup>28</sup> Schjerfbeck's self-portrait does not sit comfortably among conventional representations, whether of the self or other, at the turn-of-the-century.

Schjerfbeck continued to explore the motif of self-portraiture throughout her life, the majority created in her final years. Her work continues to become more simplified, aggressive, and internal. She later remarks

that while looking at a book of famous artists' self-portraits, "the ones that make themselves more beautiful are boring."<sup>29</sup> To this effect, she also remarks that, "A painting must be a painting, not air, not nature... Yes, beauty is a broad term, but that's not what we're all looking for... what makes a painting beautiful is the way it is painted."<sup>30</sup> Her disinterest in beauty is further proof that the so-called mask Schjerfbeck paints is not one meant to idealize.

Even though Schjerfbeck's self-portrait may not be extreme to modern eyes, its unveiling had mixed reviews. One of the most striking reactions was from her close friend Helena Westermarck, who remarked that she was puzzled by the ruthless manner of the work.<sup>31</sup> In a surprisingly passive-aggressive gesture, Westermarck refused to even include the image in her article. Instead she included a much more subdued self-portrait from 1895 (Fig. 2), effectively deeming the contemporary work unfit for viewers. Westermarck proves that sexism in art was not relegated to male critics. There was a general expectation that women create work suitable for their gender by using gentler techniques and softer colors.

For the most part, twentieth-century art critics ignored the deeper meaning behind Schjerfbeck's works and chose to focus on the more "feminine" aspects.<sup>32</sup> Critiques of work at the time were usually relegated to formal issues, with the context being ignored.<sup>33</sup> It is this misunderstanding of her work that explains why she devalued her work and categorized herself as being part of the "weaker sex."<sup>34</sup> Schjerfbeck

<sup>27</sup>Anu Koivunen, "Uncanny Motions: Facing Death, Morphing Life," *Discourse* 35:2 (2013), 255.

<sup>28</sup>Ahtola-Moorhouse 2000, 25.

<sup>29</sup>As cited in Ahtola-Moorhouse 2007, 30. See also the translation in Ahtola-Moorhouse 2000, 65. "Those that beautify themselves are boring."

<sup>30</sup>As cited in Ahtola-Moorhouse 2000, 62.

<sup>31</sup>As mentioned in *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>32</sup>Ahtola-Moorhouse 2007, 28.

<sup>33</sup>Ahtola-Moorhouse 2000, 28.

<sup>34</sup>Annabelle Gorgen, "One day the work of this Finnish artist will be part of European cultural heritage': The reception," in *Helene Schjerfbeck*, ed. Annabelle Gorgen and Hubertus Gassner (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2007), 41.



wrote, “That which lies innermost—passion—is what I would like to reveal, but then one becomes ashamed and is unable to conjure it up—because one is a woman. Only very few women have been such conjurers.”<sup>35</sup>

### III. Romaine Brooks



Figure 3: Romaine Brooks, *Self-Portrait*, 1923, Oil on Canvas, 117.5 x 68.3 cm

Although Romaine Brooks did not work in complete isolation, her stable financial situation allowed her to create art outside of major artistic movements. Much like how Schjerfbeck was able to freely experiment during her seclusion, Romaine Brooks’s independence inspired a style that cannot be strictly classified. Nonetheless, some art historians align her

work with that of the Surrealists, often claiming she preceded the movement.<sup>36</sup> During her lifetime, however, Brooks was contemptuous of modern abstraction, once asserting, “I grasped every occasion no matter how small, to assert my independence of views. I refused to accept

the slavish traditions in art.”<sup>37</sup> Brooks held fast to the societal ideals that were threatened by World War I well after peace reigned Europe. While Brooks’s technique straddled the line between traditional and unconventional, her ideas were influenced by modernity. It often appeared as if Romaine Brooks lived a life of contradictions, and the duality of her experiences were fully represented in the 1923 *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 3).

In order to fully understand the underlying meaning behind Brooks’s works, first her troubled childhood must be examined. Key to her early trauma was the influence of her mother, Ella Waterman. The volatile heiress was divorced from her husband only months after Brooks’s birth, leaving the children to be raised without a father figure.<sup>38</sup> Trapped in the custody of Waterman, Brooks was left in uncertain peril—both physical and emotional. Constantly rejected by a mother who promised, “I will break your spirits,” Brooks’s only companion was her brother, the mentally unstable St. Mar.<sup>39</sup> She was caught between two unstable forces, often taking the brunt of their anger.<sup>39</sup>

In the midst of this familial chaos, Brooks attempted to find solace in art. Unsurprisingly, she did not receive maternal support for her creative impulses.<sup>40</sup> Although Brooks’ father was not present to counteract Waterman’s disdain, he later showed a profound appreciation for Brooks’

<sup>35</sup>As cited in Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Liana Cheney, Alicia Craig Faxon, and Kathleen Lucey Russo, *Self-Portraits by Women Painters* (England: Ashgate, 2000), 176.

<sup>37</sup>As cited in Cassandra Langer, *Romaine Brooks: A Life* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 66.

<sup>38</sup>For Waterman’s title of heiress, see: Langer, 18. Ella Waterman was the daughter of Isaac Waterman Jr.—a Quaker minister who doubled as a coal and salt mine tycoon. He entrusted the capital of his wealth to his grandchildren, although Ella Waterman kept that fact a secret. For the impact of Brooks’s father’s absence, see: Langer, 19. Although it was never confirmed, Brooks believed that she was the product of an affair. She theorized that this was why she was resented by her mother and abandoned by her father. See also: Meryle Secrest, *Between Me and Life: A Biography of Romaine Brooks*, (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 17. Secrest argues that Brooks used this claim as a coping mechanism, and she often flip-flopped between whether or not it was true.

<sup>39</sup>For the Waterman quote, see Langer, 26. For the mentally unstable St. Mar, see Secrest, 19. Secrest observes that the Waterman family line had “sinister strains,” Ella Waterman’s sister was an alcoholic who also had a mentally unstable child, Mamie. Waterman’s own unpredictability, paired with the fact that she married an alcoholic, builds the foundation for an unfortunate bloodline.

<sup>40</sup>Whitney Chadwick, *Amazons in the Drawing Room: The Art of Romaine Brooks* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2000), 11.

work.<sup>41</sup> It was not until Brooks' mother disappeared to Europe that she was finally encouraged to pursue her passion.<sup>42</sup> This hiatus from Waterman's disdain was short-lived, however, and soon Brooks found herself once again in the clutches of her mother.

Because of Waterman's constant travels, Brooks jumped from boarding schools to convents to finishing schools.<sup>43</sup> She finally emancipated herself at the age of twenty-one, and then pursued an academic education in painting.<sup>44</sup> Much like Schjerfbeck and Werefkin, Brooks used her lessons as a foundation from which she built a unique style. Unlike most women at the time, Brooks travelled alone to Rome, where she was admitted into the Scuola Nazionale as the only female student. Despite her passion and talent, Brooks was consistently berated and demeaned by her classmates.<sup>45</sup> There was an overarching "male anxiety" towards woman attempting to change their status, and this filtered into art education.<sup>46</sup> By going against societal standards, female artists were becoming increasingly more difficult to suppress.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, men still strived to wield their power. As a single woman in Rome, Brooks could not walk around the city without being accosted by men.<sup>48</sup> Such behavior against women proves Brooks' resil-

ience. Her desire to study art and further her career was unsupported by the greater society, forcing her to overcome the oppressive sexism of the *fin de siècle*.

Eventually, Brooks had to leave Rome because she felt unsafe.<sup>49</sup> The move to Capri, an island off the coast of Italy, proved to be a significant turning point in her life. Brooks formed a close circle of friends, among whom was the aforementioned Axel Munthe.<sup>50</sup> The two likely discussed the effects on the subconscious, considering they spent so much time together. Interestingly, the same man linked to Schjerfbeck's understanding of the inner self was also closely tied to Brooks.

Despite the fact that her wealth ensured that she did not need to create work for others, Brooks devoted her artistry to portraiture.<sup>51</sup> Her ability to capture a haunting presence on canvas earned her the title "Thief of Souls," but it is suggested that Brooks was merely transferring her own emotions into the paint.<sup>52</sup> Brooks integrated her painful experiences into all of her work, merging the external and the internal. It is in the 1923 *Self-Portrait* that Brooks most succinctly incorporates her past and future, the physical and emotional. The painting reads like a diary entry, symbolic meaning laced throughout the brushstrokes.

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<sup>41</sup>Langer, 25.

<sup>42</sup>Ella Waterman eventually ceased paying the laundress, putting the woman in immense financial strain. Mrs. Hickey was forced to seek out Brooks grandparents to relieve the burden. Romaine Brooks's temporary solace, despite living in poverty, was ended. Langer, 23

<sup>43</sup>It should be noted that Waterman was travelling around the world to find a cure for her son's mental illness. Her love for him and his health was all-consuming, so much so that she did not have room in her heart for her youngest daughter.

<sup>44</sup>Langer, 30.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>46</sup>Hall, 224.

<sup>47</sup>As suggested by Ibid, 217.

<sup>48</sup>Secrest, 108.

<sup>49</sup>Langer, 36.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 37. See also: Secrest, 135.

<sup>51</sup>Romaine Brooks is remembered as a woman of immeasurable wealth, but in the early years of her art career she did not have the pleasure of financial independence. Ella Waterman withheld her daughter's inheritance, forcing Brooks to be reliant upon her mother for support. The meager allowance she was allotted barely covered her cost of living. In 1902, Romaine Brooks's mother passed away, leaving her with a significant fortune. The sudden wealth ensured that Brooks would no longer have to struggle to support her artistic career. Brooks did not have to rely on the support of patrons or the income from commissions. In fact, she could now paint and draw whomever and whatever she pleased. Much in the same way that a life of isolation allowed Schjerfbeck to experiment, so too did Brooks achieve unexpected explorative freedom in her art.

<sup>52</sup>Chadwick, 11.

Brooks had a tumultuous relationship with her past. She suffered unimaginable traumas in her early years, from physical to mental to sexual.<sup>53</sup> Brooks wanted to liberate herself from these oppressive memories, but her attempts were unsuccessful.<sup>54</sup> Even in her old age, Brooks lamented, “My dead mother gets between me and life.”<sup>55</sup> Brooks came to view herself as a phoenix, rising from the ashes of her youth. She believed that the internal self had the ability to overcome all attacks on the external.<sup>56</sup> In Brooks’s self-portrait, the resolute woman looking out at the viewer is clearly strong and capable. Yet she still manages to leak some insecurity and fear into the painting, proving that Brooks’ self-perception was at odds with her internal experience.

Brooks paints herself staring directly at the viewer, a far cry from Schjerfbeck’s timid gaze. Her face is set towards the viewer and herself with stern but not unkind eyes. She wears the expression of a woman who has seen a lifetime of pain, but who has overcome adversity. Adorned in an elegant black suit with a gloved hand poised in front of her, Brooks highlights her aristocracy while also hinting at her individuality. The woman’s sophistication is offset by the background, depicting a destitute city. This self-portrait is laced with symbolism and meaning relating to her life and self.

The somber color scheme, part of Brooks’ hallmark style, evokes a melancholy atmosphere.<sup>57</sup> Only slight bursts of colors are per-

mitted, as seen in the mildly rouged lips and a subtle pin on the jacket. Otherwise, the painting is a study in gray. Brooks wrote to a friend that on occasion, “I shut myself up for months without seeing a soul and give shape in my paintings to my visions of sad and gray shadows.” The colors are not merely an aesthetic choice, Brooks connects the grays as a reflection of her depressive states. The sky is a muddled blue, reminiscent of a retreating storm; symbolizing her struggle with overcoming her past, this example suggests that she has recently done so. Brooks’s figure is clothed in black, with a white undershirt acting as an arrow pointing towards the face. Her skin echoes the blues in the sky, showing that the storm inside her is also fading. The minimized color scheme is repeated throughout the painting, creating a cohesive whole, thus emphasizing the meticulous procedures Brooks followed when creating a work of art.

A top hat shades Brooks’ eyes, creating the illusion of someone who watches, but does not want to be seen. Only a glimmer of light reaches out from the shadowy depths, piercing the viewer with an unwavering stare. According to Wendy Wick Reaves, “By holding our gaze, [women] artists challenge the objectification so frequently inherent in male depictions of women.”<sup>59</sup> Brooks references the oppressive male gaze, both that of the artist and viewer. Although Brooks takes a position of confrontation in the painting, she also manages to shield

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<sup>53</sup>Brooks’s sexual assaults were left undocumented in her memoirs, but art historians have uncovered information that hints at such struggles. Langer suggests that Brooks may have been accosted by St. Mar during her childhood. Langer 9. In her old age, Brooks revealed that her brother-in-law, Alexander Hamilton Phillips, forced himself upon her. She was having financial difficulties and had turned to Phillips for advice. He took advantage of her vulnerable situation. She subsequently became pregnant and had no choice but to give the child up for adoption. When she was financially stable she returned to retrieve her child, only to learn that the baby had died at two months. Secrest, 92.

<sup>54</sup>Langer, 44.

<sup>55</sup>As cited in Secrest, 383.

<sup>56</sup>Chadwick, 11.

<sup>57</sup>Brooks derived this palette while painting in St. Ives, and continued to use it throughout her life. Ironically, it was also in St. Ives that Schjerfbeck developed a livelier palette.

<sup>58</sup>Secrest, 284.

<sup>59</sup>Wendy Wick Reaves and Anne Collins Goodyear, *Reflections/Refractions: Self-Portraits in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2009), 5.

herself from prying eyes. She is hesitant to let others see her true self. The shadow that echoes the brim of the hat lends to the unreadability of Brooks' expression. The dichotomy between the presented self and the internal self, which can also be seen in Schjerfbeck's self-portrait, was to be expected in aristocratic circles during the early 1900s. A well-mannered member of this social class would portray herself as a stoic, groomed person with high morals. To discard this mask in public was an unforgivable offense, and Brooks sometimes suffered such consequences.<sup>60</sup> On the surface, Brooks's self-portrait is poised and elegant. Yet, the glimmer of light in her eyes, as well as the challenging stare, hint at a devious inner self.

Of special symbolic significance is Brooks' suit, which deserves careful analysis to be fully understood. It was clearly not common apparel for women of the 1920s, fitting closest with women's riding habits. Brooks was aligning herself with the iconic nineteenth-century Amazon, a term referencing female riders. The Amazon was commonly painted by artists such as Manet, Renoir, and Courbet.<sup>61</sup> Looking at the idealized form in *Manet's Portrait of an Amazon* (Fig. 4), it is clear that Brooks was taking back the female form and reanalyzing it. Manet's Amazon is a woman to be ogled, her exaggeratedly slim waist and beautiful face overpowering any hint of individuality. Brooks' figure, on the other hand, is neither feminine nor masculine. She separated herself from the societal conception of feminine beauty through the use of androgyny.<sup>62</sup> Her



Figure 4: Edouard Manet, *Portrait of an Amazon*, 1882, Oil on Canvas, 73 x 52 cm

self-portrait references the outbreak of dandyism, the reinvention of the modern woman, and hints at her lesbianism.<sup>63</sup>

In the early 1900s, fashion allowed women to distance themselves from bourgeois standards of femininity. Styles that emphasized a boyish figure, as seen in Brooks' Self-Portrait, were used by lesbians

to imply power and independence. Portraying herself in masculine attire, Brooks was part of a movement to reinvent the imagery surrounding lesbians.<sup>64</sup> Brooks designed her own clothing, which was inspired by Baudelaire's concept of the dandy.<sup>65</sup> The suit in her self-portrait creates an ambiguous sexuality, but it does not suggest that Brooks wanted to look like a man.<sup>66</sup> Brooks is proud to be a woman, but will not adhere to the conventional representations of her sex. Any suggestions at masculinity are juxtaposed by a carefully made-up face, showing that Brooks was feminine in her own right

Despite a stream of lovers, as well as a lifetime partner, Brooks considered herself a loner.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>60</sup>After one unfortunate incident, when Brooks voiced her private thoughts in a public setting, she remarked, "I was very angry with myself and on returning home gave vent to my feelings by jerking down the curtains of my bedroom window, rings and all." Langer, 53.

<sup>61</sup>Cheney, Faxon, and Russo, 177.

<sup>62</sup>Chadwick, 33.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>65</sup>Langer, 122.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>67</sup>Brooks was in a lifetime commitment with Natalie Barney, although the two had an open relationship. Langer suggests that they were actually in a polyamorous relationship with another woman, Élisabeth de Gramont. Langer argues that Brooks was fulfilled by this relationship and did not suffer from undue jealousy. It also enabled Brooks to have sufficient alone time, something she cherished. Langer, 5-6.



She associated with the French lapide, or out-cast.<sup>68</sup> Like with herself, Brooks felt she was at war with the world. Secrest says, “Romaine had an ideal image of herself as a perfect being, a saint, Natalie’s Angel, which coexisted with a second view of herself as powerless, unwanted, and unlovable.”<sup>69</sup> The outbreak of World War I allowed Brooks to become the hero she believed herself to be. During the war, Brooks volunteered for ambulance duty, converted her cellar into a bomb shelter, and used her artistic talents to raise funds.<sup>70</sup> The French government awarded her the Cross of Legion of Honor for her effort, and she included the pin on her lapel in *Self-Portrait*. When the time for heroism was over, Brooks felt unneeded. By providing for others, Brooks proved her own strength. Losing this brought back her childhood fears of inadequacy. By including the pin in her self-portrait, Brooks is telling the viewer she is as brave as she looks. She is reassuring herself, creating a mask of strength over her insecurities. As one of the only areas of color in the painting, the pin shows that she took great pride in her deeds and considers herself to have been integral in the war effort.

Brooks’ inner self is represented in the painted figure, but her struggle is most evident in the background. In a constant attempt to leave the past behind, Brooks immortalized her pain in paint. The crumbled city behind her represents the past, from which Brooks is separated by a balcony wall. She stands above the ruins, a triumphant figure that has won against all odds. Brooks considered herself a sole survivor—she stands alone on that balcony. Her figure is isolated, personifying the feelings of loneliness and

inadequacy that were born in her childhood and resurfaced continually throughout adulthood.

Brooks’ artwork was met with considerable praise from critics, perhaps because she chose not to stray towards abstraction. When compared to the “degenerate” art of the period, her work was more closely aligned with the formal techniques critics preferred. Her first exhibition in 1910 ended with floods of positive responses, and it succinctly sealed her career as a portraitist. Many critics commented on her ability to capture more than a simple likeness, but only Guillaume Apollinaire noticed deeper emotion beneath the figure. “She painted with strength...but with sadness, too much sadness.”<sup>71</sup>

Romaine Brooks was a prominent figure in the twentieth-century French aristocracy. Her life was troubled, and she struggled to find peace. As means to cope with her history and to prove her self-worth, Brooks created a self-portrait that depicted a triumph over disaster. She painted herself with symbolic strength, aligning herself with the Amazon and reminding the viewer of her selfless deed in World War I. But, behind this mask, the viewer can see the pained eyes of a woman who has seen too much. Her past is laid out openly for all to see. She cloaks her insecurities in paint, but they emerge nonetheless.

Marianne Werefkin is most well known in the history of art for her role as a *salonnière*, but her passion for discussing art is only triumphed by her desire to create.<sup>73</sup> She spent her life pursuing art—both seeking knowledge

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<sup>68</sup>Adelyn D. Breeskin, *Romaine Brooks: Thief of Souls* (Washington D.C.: National Collection of Fine Arts, 1971), 35. See also: Chadwick, 13 in which she translates lapide as the abused and martyred self. As well as: Langer, 8 who translates it to mean, “the martyred lesbian and artist whom the ignorant stone to death.”

<sup>69</sup>Secrest, 389.

<sup>70</sup>Langer, 75-76.

<sup>71</sup>As cited by Secrest, 198.

<sup>72</sup>Breeskin, 24.

<sup>73</sup>She is occasionally referred to as Marianne von Werefkin. Her German colleagues inserted the “von” in reference to her family’s military history. Werefkin also earned the title “Baroness”—an inaccurate aristocratic association—because of her financial independence. Behr, 26.



and experimenting with creation. Unlike Brooks and Schjerfbeck, these ambitions were supported from a young age by Werefkin's parents. Because her mother was an artist, Werefkin had an inspirational role model who provided a unique perspective about the capabilities of women. She was encouraged to paint, and her father's position as a general in the Russian Czar's army ensured that her endeavors were easily funded. Because of her father's military position, Werefkin's family lived in several different cities throughout the Russian Empire. This enabled her to study in several institutions—from private lessons to the Moscow School of Art—even-  
tually coming to study under the renowned artist Ilya Repin.<sup>74</sup> It was within the walls of this studio that Werefkin's potential was realized.

Whereas Brooks was met with reproach from male figureheads in the art world, Werefkin received overwhelming praise from Repin. He was a source of unending support, bestowing upon her the title "Russian Rembrandt." In 1888, Werefkin accidentally shot her right hand during a hunting expedition. Repin helped her overcome this disability, teaching Werefkin to paint with her left hand and encouraging her to continue her artistic practice.<sup>75</sup> While Repin's studio was a place where Werefkin was encouraged to cultivate her talent, it was also where she encountered the source that would hinder her artistic career—Alexei Jawlensky. Jawlensky was a

penniless lieutenant who first charmed Werefkin in 1891 as a fellow student of Repin. Werefkin adored his work, and as his muse she fervently hoped to help further his career. They worked in Repin's studio side-by-side until her father's death in 1896, when a large inheritance financed their move to Munich.<sup>76</sup> At this point, Werefkin made the altruistic decision to end her career so she could dedicate herself towards inspiring Jawlensky.

Werefkin's decision might seem nonsensical, given the esteemed praise she received from artists and friends. Her view of art, however, sheds some light on her decision. To Werefkin, art was an entity greater than man—it was Godly in its power.<sup>77</sup> As a devoted worshiper, she showed her piety through abstinence. "I love art with a passion so selfless that when I believed that I saw that I would be able to serve it better by abstaining myself, so that another could succeed—I did it."<sup>78</sup> Behind her belief of Jawlensky's superior talent were the constructs of society and her adherence to sexist ideals. Werefkin thought that as a man, Jawlensky would be able to penetrate the art world more effectively.<sup>79</sup> Much in the same way that Schjerfbeck dismissed her own work due to her sex, Werefkin wrote in her journal, "Am I a true artist? Yes, yes, yes. Am I a woman? Alas. Yes, yes, yes. Are the two able to work as a pair? No, no, no."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Adrienne Kochman, "Ambiguity of Home: Identity and Reminiscence in Marianne Werefkin's Return Home, c. 1909," *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide*, 5 (2006): n.p. It is clear that her talents were well supported because at the age of nineteen she was granted her own atelier. Mara R. Witzling, ed., *Voicing Our Visions: Writings by Women Artists*, (New York: Universe, 1991), 128.

<sup>75</sup>Behr, 20. Repin also insisted that he was jealous of Werefkin's talents, although Natalya Tolstaya suggests that this statement was merely to encourage Werefkin. Natalya Tolstaya, "Marianne Werefkin: The Woman and the Artist," *Tretyakov Gallery 3* (2010), 73. Tolstaya's assumption only plays into the sexist stereotyping abundant in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>76</sup>While getting treatment for her hand injury, Werefkin spent some time in major German cities. It was here that she realized the possibilities of modern art and felt inspired to change her style. When she could finally afford a move, she decided to return to this place of inspiration. As suggested by Tolstaya, 73.

<sup>77</sup>Witzling, 129.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>79</sup>This is a European construct that Linda Nochlin suggests was not as prevalent in Russia. Maura Reilly, ed., *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2015), 113. Why Werefkin adhered to outside stigma instead of relying on her own country's advancement in unknown, although she may have felt the European art world superior because of its modernity.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.* See also, Kochman: "I am a woman, I lack every [ability for] creation. I can understand everything and cannot create... I don't have the words to express my ideal. I am looking for the person, the man, who can give this ideal form. As a woman, wanting someone who could give the internal world expression, I met Jawlensky..."

Jawlensky depended on Werefkin for inspiration, adoration, and money.<sup>81</sup> Werefkin was willing to oblige on all accounts, even when she received nothing in return.<sup>82</sup> She finally reached a breaking point when, in 1901, Jawlensky impregnated Werefkin's housemaid.<sup>83</sup> The betrayal was enough to convince Werefkin to draw again, but she still would not turn her back on Jawlensky. Her revived work was a complete shift from the realism she studied in Russia, although it was not quite as abstract as her writings may have predicted.<sup>84</sup> Even after her unending support of his art, Jawlensky could not deem to repay her kindness. Gabriele Münter remarked on his treatment of Werefkin's work, "She was extremely perceptive and intelligent, but Jawlensky didn't always approve of her work. He often teased her about being too academic in her techniques, and too intellectual and revolutionary in her ideas. He used to pretend that she had never managed to liberate herself entirely from the teachings of the Russian master Ilya Repin."<sup>85</sup> This disregard of Werefkin's talent hints at the reasons behind her feelings of artistic inferiority. Nonetheless, Werefkin did not heed Jawlensky's disapprov-

al. She continued to explore abstraction for the rest of her life.

During Werefkin's ten-year hiatus from making art, she ardently researched and debated issues of art theory. Her salon was the center of the Munich avant-garde, where painting techniques were investigated, theories debated, and movements formed.<sup>86</sup> Art historian Gustav Pauli reminisced that, "on all questions of art and literature, old and new, [Werefkin] would engage in debate with unheard-of zeal and just as much spirit."<sup>87</sup> Much of her ideas were documented in her journal, *Lettres à un Inconnu*—a product of her failing relationship and growing discontent.<sup>88</sup> Within these pages she discusses the possibilities of abstract art, the effects of color, and her desire to once again paint. The greatest accomplishment of Werefkin's salon, which occurred after she began painting again, lies in the development of *Der Blaue Reiter's* precursor—Neue Künstler-Vereinigung München (NKVM).<sup>89</sup>

Marianne Werefkin, Alexei Jawlensky, Gabriele Münter, and Wassily Kandinsky, along with a few other artists, worked to develop a new understanding of abstract painting.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>81</sup>Werefkin received a large yearly commission after her father's death. Some sources have suggested that she and Jawlensky remained unmarried because otherwise the funds would have been cut off. This stipend supported the two until the 1917 Russian Revolution effectively ended it. When the money eventually ran out, in 1921, Jawlensky left Werefkin for another woman. Witzling, 128.

<sup>82</sup>Werefkin's memoirs, *Lettres à un Inconnu*, describe her feelings of discontent in her relationship. "I am only the housekeeper, the porter. I give my life for a creation a deux, and one only asks me to pay my accounts and to not get in the way. And when, in despair, I ask for the peace of love one is sharp with me and sends me about my business." Witzling, 137.

<sup>83</sup>The household went to Russia to hide the birth, then claimed the child was Jawlensky's nephew.

<sup>84</sup>She once said, "The more reality has been transferred in a work of art into the unreal, the greater the work." Hans Roethel, *The Blue Rider*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 135.

<sup>85</sup>Behr, 20.

<sup>86</sup>Witzling, 128. Werefkin's salon was prefaced by one in Russia. Of the predecessor, Igor Grabar said, "With an excellent knowledge of foreign languages and financially comfortable [sic], she bought all the newest books and magazines on art and acquainted us, who knew but little about all this, with the latest developments in art, reading to us aloud fragments from the most recent publications on art. There I heard for the first time such names as Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Renoir, Degas, Whistler." Tolstaya, 74.

<sup>87</sup>Behr, 26.

<sup>88</sup>Werefkin began her journals when she realized Jawlensky had been unfaithful to her. Prior to this, she had believed that the two of them had a mutual understanding. They were partners in life, but would remain celibate so that their full focus could be on art. As suggested by her writings, quotes in Witzling, 134. Jawlensky's betrayal was not only to Werefkin, but to art as well.

<sup>89</sup>"Neue Künstler-Vereinigung München" translates to "New Artists Association." Witzling, 128.

<sup>90</sup>A year after Werefkin and Jawlensky settled into Munich, Wassily Kandinsky arrived on the scene with his partner Gabriele Münter. Jawlensky and Kandinsky met at Anton Azbé's studio and quickly became friends.

From this the artist collective NKVM was born—a community that believed art should be formed from inner experiences.<sup>91</sup> Norbert Wolf notes that it was also “the first artists’ association to include large numbers of



Figure 5: Marianne Werefkin, *Self-Portrait*, 1908-1910, Tempera on Paper mounted on Board, 51 x 34 cm

women, as members or guests, a circumstance that was largely the result of Werefkin’s strong personality.”<sup>92</sup>

The exhibitions developed by the group were heavily attacked by critics, although Franz Marc refuted the negative remarks with his review.<sup>93</sup> The NKVM quickly dissolved when one of Kandinsky’s more ab-

stracted works was refused by some modest members, spurring him to secede and create a rival facet called *Der Blaue Reiter*.<sup>94</sup>

Although Werefkin never officially joined *Der Blaue Reiter*, she is considered a founding member of the group. Werefkin worked as an artistic evangelist, helping other artists realize their potential and guiding them along their path to abstraction. “People have always come to tell me that I am their star,” Werefkin said. “They couldn’t progress in life without me. So, foolishly, I

made myself available to serve them until they knew their direction. I held the light of ideals high, I illuminated the way for them.”<sup>95</sup> It is unsurprising that Werefkin put her own work aside to help others, considering her contribution to Jawlensky’s career. In fact, many of the revolutionary ideas Kandinsky claimed as his own can be attributed to Werefkin.<sup>96</sup> Her ideas on abstraction, as well as her inspiration role to *Der Blaue Reiter*, made her a vital asset to the group.

Marianne Werefkin’s *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 5) was created during the transition period from NKVM to *Der Blaue Reiter*. It acts as a representation of her relationship with art—as a salonnière, a painter, and a visionary. Werefkin’s hand is not gentle in describing her features; she emphasizes the loose skin on her chin and deepens the wrinkles around her mouth. Captivating red eyes pierce the viewer, intensifying the overall impression of a harsh and calculating woman. The use of vibrant, unrealistic color points towards the influence of the Fauves as well as Werefkin’s intellectual approach to painting. The self-portrait captures Werefkin’s self-perceptions, but it also hints at the tribulations in her adult life. Her expression is poised but wary, perhaps an indication of her partner’s deceit. Werefkin’s body is sideways, neither opening herself up towards the viewer nor shutting off an advance. She puts herself in a position of control, prepared to accept or deny whomever approaches. Her face is turned in three-quarters view—a reference to Vincent van Gogh.<sup>97</sup> Werefkin’s body is awkwardly proportioned;

<sup>91</sup>Roethel, 18.

<sup>92</sup>Norbert Wolf, *Expressionism* (Köln: Taschen, 2004), 18.

<sup>93</sup>Helmut Friedel and Annegret Hoberg, ed., “The Blue Rider”: Watercolours, Drawings and Prints from the Lenbachhaus Munich: A Dance in Color (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2011), 9.

<sup>94</sup>Wolf, 18-19.

<sup>95</sup>Behr, 26.

<sup>96</sup>Witzling, 131.

<sup>97</sup>Behr, 26.

her neck and chest seem exaggeratedly large and cumbersome. They anchor the face, fortifying Werefkin's figure and presenting her as strong and capable. Whereas aspects of Brooks's and Schjerfbeck's paintings unintentionally reveal aspects of the internal, Werefkin's self-portrait is a carefully rendered autobiographical representation. Like other artists in the NKVM and *Der Blaue Reiter*, Werefkin was keenly aware of the internal experience and its effects on modern art.

Marianne Werefkin believed that in order to become a successful artist, it was vital to incorporate the self into the work.<sup>98</sup> She wrote, "The artistic creation thus is made from without to within... True art is that which renders the soul of things."<sup>99</sup> A testament to Werefkin's ability to achieve this effect can be seen through Kandinsky's condescending analysis of Werefkin's work as, "confessions in a diary."<sup>100</sup> This backlash from a close friend shows deep-seated sexism in Germany, especially because Kandinsky himself hoped to explore the internal experience in his art. Nonetheless, it proves how accurately Werefkin represented her inner self in her paintings. Much like Brooks, Werefkin was skilled at reflecting her sitter's emotions onto the canvas.<sup>101</sup> This is partly thanks to the fact that, unlike the other members of *Der Blaue Reiter*, Werefkin's work focused on social issues and human existence. She was interested in how people are influenced by uncontrollable forces, such as psychological tendencies and destiny.<sup>102</sup>

Werefkin's use of color acts as a direct connection to the internal experience, embedding her personality into the pigments.<sup>103</sup> Vibrant, unnatural colors flood the canvas in swirling

brushstrokes, framing Werefkin's face and returning the viewer's eyes to her penetrating stare. Although not nearly as somber as Brooks's self-portrait, Werefkin infused a lot of black into her work, hinting at impressions by her Russian education.<sup>104</sup> The self-portrait was created using Werefkin's preferred tempera and gouache technique, something she began to practice along



Figure 6: Henri Matisse, *Woman with a Hat*, 1905, Oil on Canvas, 80.65 x 59.69 cm

with her contemporaries.<sup>105</sup> Her mastery of the medium is evident in *Self-Portrait*, where she highlights certain areas with varnish to intensify the light and leaves the rest unattended so that the tempera colors remain vibrant.<sup>106</sup>

The colors may seem spontaneous, but each area of her paintings were

carefully laid out prior to creation. Werefkin would make a preliminary sketch onto which she would demarcate the color of each section.<sup>107</sup>

Werefkin's elongated face is painted in a dizzying array of colors, bright yellow highlighting the cheekbones and deep blue shadowing the eyelids. A streak of green punctuates the nose, reminiscent of Matisse's *Woman with a Hat* (Fig. 6). Matisse's influence was especially

<sup>98</sup>Witzling, 138.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 141.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 131.

<sup>101</sup>Behr, 32.

<sup>103</sup>As suggested by Wolf, 9. See also Miguel Fernandez, "Dans le prisme de Werefkin," *L'Œil* 515 (2000), 45: "Pour Werefkin, 'l'abstrait' designe une realite interieure, un monde d'idees et de sentiments, exprimables a travers les couleurs et les formes, dans un systeme de representation non mimetique."

<sup>104</sup>Friedel and Hoberg, 244.

<sup>105</sup>Her contemporaries eventually returned to oil painting, but Werefkin remained faithful to the medium. Ibid., 243.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid.



important to members of the NKVM and *Der Blaue Reiter* due to his emancipation of color.<sup>108</sup> While Matisse's figure in *Woman with a Hat* is revolutionarily portrayed, she still maintains a sense of femininity and beauty. Werefkin's evasion of these concepts is in part explained by the Expressionist desire to discard the ideal. Norbert Wolf notes that it was preferable to paint unseemly or grotesque images so as "to liberate art from the ghetto of the 'beautiful and true', where it had degenerated into pretty, innocuous decoration for home and fireside."<sup>109</sup> By ascribing to this theory, Werefkin was rivaling traditional women's paintings. Her self-portrait is pointedly not idealized. This is further exemplified by the fact that Werefkin's friend Gabriele Münter painted her in a way that described Werefkin as a kind, petite woman with a beautiful countenance—proving that *Self-Portrait* was electing to disregard female standards.

The most dramatic aspect of the self-portrait is Werefkin's eyes. The intention to emphasize this area is evident in the *impasto* thickness of the paint. The irises are painted a startling red-orange color, contrasted by the blue-green sclera. Framed with a solid black line, they stand out against the face and continually recapture the viewer's gaze. Werefkin reverses the viewer's role from observer to being observed. She painted her eyebrows in thick, undulating lines, adding an air of incredulity. Partnered with flared nostrils, there is a sense of wildness and discontent in Werefkin's expression. Werefkin finished the portrait when she was fifty-one and, like Schjerfbeck, she was looking back on her life. Bitter over years spent neglecting her art, Werefkin looks with determination to the future—resolved to redefine her life.

Although Werefkin seems like a woman shackled, she held firmly to her freedom—if

not in practice then in idea. While there has been speculation as to why Werefkin and Jawlensky did not wed—from financial reasons to those of status—she wrote in her journals that "the woman possessed is a slave."<sup>110</sup> In her self-portrait, Werefkin reaffirms her desire for independence and individuality. *Self-Portrait* depicts a woman who is confident in herself and her work; she is not bound by the conventional sexual restraints of society. Werefkin wants the viewer to understand her power and influence, which—despite Jawlensky—was abundantly clear in the Munich art scene.

Unlike Schjerfbeck and Brooks, Werefkin did not separate herself from the art world. Instead, she became a major player in modern artistic movements and influenced other artists. Werefkin saw herself as a resilient, independent woman. Although her self-portrait clearly references this ideal, it also hints at her troubled relationship with Alexei Jawlensky and her hiatus from art. Werefkin's attention to the internal experience, a concept that was formulated through her study of art, elevates her self-portrait past mere representation. She encapsulated her spirit, her theories, and her life on the canvas.

## V. Conclusion

At the *fin de siècle*, the female form was being manipulated, idealized, and oversexualized by male artists. Artists throughout history, including Manet and Matisse, subtly transformed the woman from a human being into an object. This act also proved to associate successful artistry with "male sexual energy." By portraying themselves in ways that elevated the internal experience and quieted the external, Schjerfbeck, Brooks, and Werefkin reclaimed the female figure. Their portraiture was unprecedented in

<sup>108</sup>Roethel, 20.

<sup>109</sup>Wolf, 10.

<sup>110</sup>Witzling, 136. Werefkin later remarks on the irony that her beliefs do not align with her practice.



the art world, where women were expected to create traditional works. Despite that the turn-of-the-century was a time of rapid change, women were expected to keep their artistic practices within society's patriarchal standards.

Helene Schjerfbeck, Romaine Brooks, and Marianne Werefkin disregarded the expectations of their contemporaries, critics, and mentors. They refused to merely paint what they saw. Instead, they captured emotion on canvas, both those of the subject and of themselves. Each of these women have been criticized for their honesty, but they have also been exalted for their ability to capture the spirit of a sitter. This skill is most masterfully used in their self-portraits, where each brushstroke is laced with meaning.

When approaching their own likenesses, these women opted not to idealize themselves. Werefkin chose to exaggerate the signs of old age, Brooks donned an expression that references masculine dominance, and Schjerfbeck portrayed herself as fearful. By intentionally contesting the iconography of beautified womankind, Schjerfbeck, Brooks, and Werefkin redefined the male gaze. These portraits are not to be admired for their beauty, but rather for their artistry and skillful portrayal of the internal experience.

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